Person to Person:

An Alberta Dialogue on Economic Equity for Women

January 1989

Alberta
WOMEN'S SECRETARIAT

89-01769/

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FOREWORD

The changing role of women has brought considerable benefits to Alberta. Certainly the provincial economy has gained from the essential work done by women both within and outside of the home. And women themselves now have a whole new range of options and opportunities for contributing to society and for leading their lives. Still, the changes of the last few decades have generated new issues and concerns for women and their families. Each of these issues – and there are many – affects the economic and social well-being of Albertans, female and male alike.

In June 1988, the Government of Alberta launched the *Dialogue on Economic Equity for Women* to learn what Albertans had to say about the priorities, challenges and issues now facing women, both in the home and in the workplace.

Although not a statistical survey, the *Dialogue* tapped a cross-section of the views and opinions of Albertans. Its findings, summarized in this report, will provide the Alberta Government with a base of understanding as it continues to develop strategies to promote the status of women through initiatives such as the *Plan for Action for Women*.

First announced in the Throne Speech in 1986, the *Plan for Action* is intended to enhance women's economic and social equality by continuing to promote women's participation in all areas of Alberta society. In recent years, this Government has initiated a wide range of strategies to achieve equity for women. There is, however, more to be accomplished.

The *Dialogue* and the *Plan for Action* reflect the principles and guidelines described in *Caring and Responsibility: A Statement of Social Policy for Alberta*. Released last year, the statement outlines your Government's commitment to developing policies and programs responsive to the changing needs of Albertans and supportive of their individual goals, choices and decisions.

This social policy statement contains the Government's pledge to involve Albertans in identifying emerging issues and policy options. It speaks of the need to create an environment in which Albertans can be self-reliant and responsible for themselves and their families. And, perhaps most importantly, it declares our desire to foster a society in which all Albertans may participate fully and on equal terms.

This report is a summary of the thoughts, feelings, opinions and views of the women and men who participated in the *Dialogue*. These valuable insights will provide an important source of information for consideration by Government in future policy and program development on issues related to economic equity for women. In partnership, we can then work toward ensuring that Government policy considers and reflects the information that was shared with us.

Thank you to all who contributed to this discussion.

The Honourable Elaine J. McCoy, Q. C.
Minister Responsible for Women's Issues

INTRODUCTION

"It is the role of the Government of Alberta to promote a society which respects the beliefs, values, worth, and contributions of all individuals and allows them to participate fully in all aspects of Alberta life." *Caring and Responsibility: A Statement of Social Policy for Alberta*

Women have always contributed to Alberta society in many different ways. But in recent decades their involvement, particularly outside the home, has grown. While women continue to be the central figures in the home as caregivers, in the majority of Alberta families, they are also wage earners. Today, women constitute 44 percent of Alberta's labour force and 53 percent of its post-secondary student population. In short, women are now engaging in all walks and at all levels of social and economic life in this province. But in doing so, what are the challenges they may face?

In launching the *Alberta Dialogue on Economic Equity for Women*, we wanted to learn what the people of Alberta had to say about this question. We asked women throughout the province to describe the impact of societys' recent changes on them and their families. We talked with women in the home, both on farms and in cities. We talked with women from a broad range of occupations. Many of the women were married, some were not. Some had been married and now are the sole support of their families. A full range of ages was covered, as well as women of different ethnic backgrounds. We invited them to identify the economic issues of importance to them and to suggest how these might be managed by governments and individuals.

In all we interviewed about 200 individuals. We held group discussions (focus groups) in 12 rural and urban communities across Alberta.* We interviewed spokespersons for several unions, members of the Alberta public service, and leaders of dozens of special interest groups representing everyone from homemakers to female entrepreneurs. Additionally, we spoke with more than 20 employers from small, medium and large businesses and the public sector.

This report summarizes the economic issues identified by those individuals and outlines the many suggestions they made for dealing with them. The views of the focus group participants, public service members, and special interest group representatives are contained in parts one and two of this document; the comments of employers are outlined in part three.

As the following pages show, the concerns and opinions expressed were varied and often at odds. But a consensus did emerge – the Alberta Government should continue to enhance women's ability to make choices by continuing to foster recognition for their contributions to society, in the home, in the workplace and in the community. Declared one woman, a career counsellor: "Women need to be valued and respected for whatever they choose to do."

* Group discussion of two or more hours in duration were held in the following communities: Airdrie, Calgary, Edmonton, Edson, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Peace River, Red Deer, Slave Lake, and Wainwright.

PART ONE – IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES

> ***"A writer once said the hardest thing for a woman to do was to take control of her own life. How many of us knew that when we were starting out? How many of us knew it at 40?"***
> *Focus group participant.*

Dialogue participants recognized that the social changes of the last three decades have created unprecedented and welcome opportunities for women. But the majority agreed that, despite their advances, women today still face a variety of economic and social limits to full equality. Dual responsibilities for home and work, discrimination, stereotyping, rigid work schedules, divorce, society's conflicting expectations – all of these things and others hamper women from taking full control of their lives. What women want, concurred most *Dialogue* participants, are greater opportunities for economic security, whether they choose to stay home and raise children, have an outside career, or both.

The following is an elaboration on the major economic and social challenges identified by *Dialogue* focus groups, as well as in the interviews with various advocacy groups and Alberta public servants.

DOING DOUBLE DUTY

> ***"Women have been encouraged to work outside the home, but men have not been encouraged to work inside of it. As a consequence, most women now have two jobs instead of one."***
> *Focus group participant.*

Increased employment opportunities, changing social attitudes, better education, urbanization, the rising cost of living, a higher divorce rate, effective birth control – all have increased women's participation in the workforce. But as most *Dialogue* participants verified, women's responsibilities at home have generally stayed much the same. In focus group after focus group, women said balancing the demands of work and family is the major challenge facing them today. Many women were successfully coping with jobs and family thanks to help from their spouses and/or the ability to hire outside help. But a number of women wanted more sharing of responsibility for home and children.

Some who juggled full-time careers and children were successful but exhausted. Recalled one woman: "I wanted to be super-mom, keep a clean house, and look good. But I found I could hardly drag myself out of bed." Said another: "Women are supposed to be great housekeepers, brilliant career women, raise fantastic kids, and look fabulous at the end of the day. It's just not fair."

For many others, the demands of home had limited their participation in the workplace. Said one woman: "As a mother, you cannot pursue your job 100 per cent because you have responsibility for your family." As a result, some women had accepted low-paying "pink collar ghetto" jobs with fewer demands and, consequently, less chance for advancement.

Others had refused promotions because of young children at home. Some families made different choices. "It's too agonizing to have a family and work too. I made a conscious decision with my husband that we would not have children," said one woman. Still other women had temporarily withdrawn from the workplace, at a considerable cost to careers.

THE INFLEXIBLE WORKPLACE

> ***"Until institutions restructure to fit the needs of women, Alberta will never gain access to all that women have to contribute to the commercial world."*** *A female public servant.*

The nature of the workplace had made balancing home and work duties difficult for many of the women interviewed. "The workplace is designed to fit males who are able to commit themselves to their jobs with minimum distractions related to family responsibility," said one woman. Women are "force-fitted into this system," resulting in losses to employees and employers alike. Agreed one women, a writer/researcher, "I would like to have a job I could leave at three to be home for my kid...I could work in the evening, but the company is not flexible."

According to one woman, some employers expect employees who become mothers to "continue to be the same as before. They don't provide any flexibility to adapt to the woman's changed situation." As a result, a "lot of women are getting off the fast track in their careers. This is a shame because a lot of useful productivity is being lost." Concurred another woman: "Since women won't get support from the company during this time (family-raising years), they take jobs which don't require much long-term commitment and in which they can easily be replaced."

Many of the women who had returned to work after raising children found the workplace unaccommodating in other ways. Some discovered their homemaking skills were "not being recognized or respected" by employers. Similarly, several women who had returned to old jobs were given no credit for skills and experience acquired during their years at home and so had to pick up where they left off in terms of rank and responsibility. Said one individual: "If I had been a man I would be head of the library now. But I had to interrupt my career to raise my kids and I lost those years."

At least one woman was having trouble reentering the labour market because her salary had been too high when she left. "I took maternity leave from teaching three years ago. I'm ready to go back but... the school board doesn't want to hire me because I was at the top of my range when I left. They can get a younger teacher for less."

Generally, *Dialogue* contributors were distressed by the steep economic price being paid by women who leave the workforce to raise children. One homemaker stated: "When men went away in the last war, most employers kept their jobs open for them and gave them credit on their service for pension purposes. I think the same idea should be applied for women who are out of the workforce for a time with their babies. It's important employers recognize the importance of the role of women in raising children in the early years. We should not be penalized for doing something so socially useful."

LACK OF RESPECT FOR HOMEMAKING

> ***"Our North American society doesn't value women staying at home and having a family."*** *Focus group participant.*

Many women had encountered negative attitudes to the homemaking role, not only in the workplace, but at home and among friends. Several blamed the women's movement, consumerism, working women and changing lifestyles. Others, while agreeing such attitudes exist, urged homemakers not to blame working women for them. Pleaded one woman, a career counsellor: "There is a myth that because women are entering the labour force they are saying they do not value and respect what women do in the home. That's untrue. Women should have permission to choose. I hate to see the infighting." In any event, most agreed current attitudes to homemaking were making it difficult for women to choose it as a career.

"There is a lot of pressure on women to get out of the house and work," said one woman. "Some of my working friends ask me what on earth I do with my time." Reported another: "I am a professional person, but I'm torn...working women look at me strangely and say, 'You quit and stayed home after you could get a good job?'"

Many women had been pressured by family and friends to find jobs. "When I told people at parties I was in the home, that was the end of the conversation. The subtle pressure came from my husband to go out and help with the income," reported one homemaker. "When you are at work outside the home your husband understands you are at work. But when you work at home your husband thinks that is play," said another. However, the majority of homemakers said their husbands were very supportive of their decision to stay home.

One woman blamed the woman's movement for the homemaker's fallen status. "It (the women's movement) has denigrated the role of the housewife, deprived men of their enormously strong instinctive need to provide for and protect their families. This in turn has led to males losing respect for females in a traditional role, and has made them expect that women should work, otherwise they are not pulling their weight."

Others pointed to homemaking's lack of financial compensation. "The tax system discriminates against families...women can't afford to stay home," said a member of a family advocacy group. "I feel pressure and guilt for not contributing to the family income...," said a homemaker. "We live in a society that thinks the only way to feel good about yourself is

to get a job," said a mother. One woman recounted feeling like a "non-person" when she quit her job because she lost her credit standing at her bank. "I had to rely on my husband's income for credit." One mother said her children once told her, "That's not your money, it's Daddy's." Declared one focus group member: "It's embarrassing to be at home."

Some homemakers acknowledged that they have allowed themselves to fall into the trap of undervaluing work in the home. When asked what they do, many reply, "I'm just a housewife", and then get mad at themselves for saying so.

Spokespersons for farm women's groups pointed out that although many farm wives contribute fully in running the family farm, they "don't own anything, can't get loans on their own, and can't contribute to pensions."

GOING IT ALONE

> ***"Many women are working because they are the sole support of their families. We can't go back 60 years to the day when we had all women in the home."*** *Focus group participant.*

Although full-time homemaking is certainly a valid career, many participants pointed out women are often forced into the labour market when, for a variety of reasons, they become the sole supporters of their families. Serious economic hardship can result if women are unprepared for the job market, said several people. One woman noted: "There are a lot of single parent families around now to remind us we're not as secure as we once were."

At least one woman partially blamed the judicial system for the financial troubles of divorced mothers. "Divorcees are struggling to make ends meet, while their husbands live high on the hog," she said. "I have a friend who was living on $1,200 a month for four children and herself. Meanwhile, her husband told the court he had to have $1,900 to live on. The court reduced his support payment. Women are getting shafted."

A number of women reported difficulties in obtaining support payments and alimony. "When my husband and I were married, we lived on my salary and saved his. When we divorced 20 years ago, he took off with the money," recalled a participant. Observed another woman: "There is a new group of older women who are being divorced by their husbands for younger women and are now having to find jobs because they can't live on alimony or they're not getting the alimony because the husband's not paying it."

The need for income subsidies is a very real prospect for widowed or divorced women, observed participants. "A woman can think she is okay at 65, but when her husband dies at 70, finds she is in dire straits," said one woman. The participants also indicated older women face age discrimination in the workplace or may lack job skills, and so can't find jobs. Sole-support mothers without education or training can find only low-paying jobs and so often end up losing money "by the time daycare and other work-related expenses are

figured in," said one participant. Women in one small town said many low-income single mothers ".... are quitting their jobs and going on welfare..."

A number of participants worried that many young women wanting to be homemakers seem unaware of the possibility they may one day have to join the labour force. "High school girls say, 'I don't need a career. I'm getting married,'" said one woman. Insisted another participant: "They (young women) need to be told the facts of life of being a woman in Alberta today – that they will likely work most of their lives, that they may not have a man around to support them, and that they better start right by getting a good education." Said one woman: "The message isn't getting through to women...the women on welfare could be them."

DISCRIMINATION AND STEREOTYPING

> ***"There are still employers who have the attitude women work only because they are bored at home."*** *Focus group participant.*

Participants generally agreed discrimination against women in the workplace and in education had declined substantially over the past few decades. "I was one of the few women in the waste management field and I never saw any discrimination," reported one woman. "There are lots of opportunities for women in the north," observed another. "They can drive trucks, work in forestry, in the oil patch and in management jobs." Recalled one woman: "Twenty-five years ago, if you got pregnant you lost your job." Remarked a homemaker: "Women today can learn to be anything they want – engineers, plumbers, doctors..."

According to most of the women participants, however, negative attitudes and stereotypes about women and men and their appropriate roles in society persist. As one woman noted, for example: "There seems to be a view in the academic world that women aren't good at science and math but are good at 'people things'." The media, toy manufacturers, parents and the educational system were all seen to reinforce and perpetuate these attitudes and stereotypes.

Stereotyping was seen to begin with young children in the home; participants felt parents still tend to channel boys into "masculine" activities and girls into "feminine" ones. This is carried over into the workplace with jobs being labelled as either women's or men's work. For example, since the majority of elementary school teachers are women, children were felt to develop early stereotypes of the teaching field as being a woman's job. As one participant observed: "In the rural areas, I don't think there is even one woman school principal in the Alberta school system, even though there are many qualified women."

In part, the labelling of jobs as male or female results in systemic discrimination in the workplace. For example, there are few advancement opportunities for women in pink-collar jobs. Said one woman: "Pink ghettos set up the basis for discrimination. If we didn't have them, we would get away from a lot of discrimination."

Negative attitudes were seen as responsible for the devaluation of women's work. Many participants, for example, suspected that traditional women's jobs are generally low-paying because employers think women in those jobs work only for "pin money" and to "get out of the house." A hospital worker from southern Alberta said her employer told her in no uncertain terms, "What do you need a salary increase for? You're just working to supplement your husband's salary."

Some women in non-traditional occupations had encountered a similar attitude. For example, a woman with a Master's degree in science had approached her professor in the 1970's about obtaining a PhD. "He patted my shoulder and said, 'Now, what would a nice girl like you want with a PhD?' These people are still around." A former carpenter said, "the guys got a dollar more (an hour) than I did because they had a family to look after."

Several other women in non-traditional occupations had experienced different forms of discrimination. Recalled one: "When I started working as a planner I found that men were afraid of me. My boss told me that I would never become a senior planner because that would make me a threat to his job." Another woman noted, "At work, if I stand up for my rights, they say I'm an emotional female. If a man does that, they say he has the courage of his convictions." It was also reported that women in non-traditional occupations are sometimes subjected to sexual harassment by co-workers or supervisors.

Other professional women knew of employers with higher or different expectations of female workers. "A friend got promoted to a job as a financial planner. But they made her keep on doing the typing and filing," said one group participant. Said another: "I feel like I'm under double pressure being the first woman supervisor in a non-traditional job. I feel I have to work much harder than a man in order to prove I can do the job...If I screw up, it'll be a long time before they put another woman in my job again."

Participants also identified a more subtle form of discrimination. Professional women may be treated equally at work, but according to a representative of a women's organization, "Women will never be on the same basis as men because they don't meet men on a social basis. They aren't part of the old boys' club." The spokesperson of another women's agency concurred. "Men at work have a collegial relationship with other men which helps them understand the system and get ahead. Women, as a rule, don't have that support base."

Other women had experienced subtle and not so subtle age discrimination. "I'm a substitute teacher and they definitely give preference to the young teachers who make less than I do. They also give men jobs first, because they say they have a family to support," said one woman. "My mom can't get a job and she thinks it's because she isn't young," said another. Added a professional woman: "I stopped colouring my hair when I stopped moving up the corporate ladder."

Several focus groups indicated discrimination against women in employment is a problem in small towns and rural areas. The reasons?

Some suggested the smaller pool of jobs in rural areas enables employers to underpay women. Others knew of women who had suffered discrimination but would not take advantage of existing human rights legislation for fear of being labelled troublemakers by local employers. Complaining will "wreck your relationship with an employer," said one women. "That can be fatal in a small town." As proof, one focus group cited the case of a woman in town who had filed a complaint of discrimination, had won her case, but had been nonetheless fired. "She has never gotten another job in the community. The grapevine is incredible."

As an aside, participants said finding work was a problem for many women in small towns and rural areas. Said one woman: "Often women move to a small town because their husbands get jobs there. There seem to be few jobs for women and what there are, are usually unskilled and low-paying."

PART TWO – MEETING THE CHALLENGES

> ***"The world is full of inequity. Maybe Alberta cannot achieve equity for all, but it should be remembered as a place where we tried."*** *Focus group participant.*

In identifying the challenges confronting many women today, many participants commented on one especially salient fact – women's lives are socially different from men's. Most men leave school to work uninterrupted until retirement, observed participants. But women's role as childbearer and primary caregiver means they lead their lives in very different patterns, often moving, as family situations change, between the workplace and home several times in the course of their careers.

To help women meet the challenges of today, participants suggested a variety of measures – affordable daycare, homemaker pensions, educational programs, improved career counselling – for making society more accommodating to the necessarily changing patterns of women's lives.

Following is a summary of the discussions with the *Dialogue* participants on the many potential ways to address issues related to economic equity for women.

INCREASING AWARENESS

> ***"Education is the most important thing. Too many 15 year-olds are getting pregnant and never going back to school. They don't have any guidance. We need to let kids know that they have choices, so that society will be better."*** *Advocacy group spokesperson.*

> ***"It used to be that you advised your daughters to marry money. Now, you tell them to learn how to make money."*** *Homemaker.*

> ***"Start early, before Saturday night is as far down the road as the girls can see."*** *Focus group participant.*

Through education, the Alberta Government has the opportunity to "foster a spirit in the home, schools and society that would give children of both sexes a feeling of self-worth for whatever roles they choose," said a focus group participant. Most participants viewed education of males and females as key to eliminating discrimination, unfair distribution of family duties, and other limits to full participation in the workplace.

Virtually everyone agreed girls must learn about all the career opportunities and options available to them, along with the importance of becoming self-reliant and economically secure. Among the suggested ways of informing them:

- Mentor programs, in which traditional and non-traditional female role models enter the classroom to speak about their lives and achievements; and,

- Internships, sponsored by government or industry, enabling female students to try out non-traditional jobs during summer break or as part of their post-secondary education.

In addition to labour market information, girls should also receive the social and economic facts of life, said participants. Said one woman: "Girls these days are repeating the mistakes of 20 years ago – married too young and into a pink ghetto. Women have to go back to work after the kids are older and girls need to understand that."

One person suggested government-sponsored television advertisements depicting the problems of young, single mothers. "Television can really come across to educate people about the problems of being 19 with three children around you. It works for drinking and driving, it should work for this kind of problem."

"Educate and train men to help support women in the home so that women are not expected to do all the work," said one homemaker. Others suggested educational programs for the workplace outlining the harmful effects of gender and other types of discrimination.

Additionally, participants suggested more career counselling, training and information programs for women of all ages, with special courses for homemakers and farm wives entering the paid workplace. Some suggested skills-upgrading and maintenance courses for homemakers planning an eventual return to the labour market. "You lose your skills quickly when you're out of the workforce," said one homemaker. It was also suggested that women should be eligible for education loans, regardless of their husband's income.

Other suggestions included: a central telephone referral service to apprise women of training and career counselling programs; government-sponsored labour market information groups for rural women; and, a directory of the current average wage rates for various jobs.

GIVE HOMEMAKING ITS DUE

> ***"I feel I've been of as much value or more than my working peers. I haven't cost society any money. And yet I don't get pensions or any tax breaks."*** *A homemaker.*

Virtually everyone agreed homemaking should be promoted as a valid career option with considerable economic and social benefit to society. Greater financial and social recogni-

tion would provide homemakers with more self-esteem, self-reliance, economic security, and readier access to the job market in the post-childrearing years, concurred most participants.

Suggestions for according homemakers increased recognition included:

- Homemaker's Pensions. Governments should allow women (or their husbands on their behalf) to contribute to the Canada Pension Plan. "It's scary to think about being old and not even having CPP."

- Unemployment insurance. Similarly, women taking time out from the workforce to raise children should be able to continue contributing to UIC.

- Disability insurance for homemakers.

- Tax deductions for parenting courses, playschool, nursery school, and expenses (i.e. babysitting, parking) incurred doing volunteer work. "It's an economic contribution to society to do community work."

- Child care tax credits on a par with daycare subsidies given working mothers.

- A universal guaranteed income for homemakers.

- Paying women to have babies. "Quebec does it. In Norway the government pays so much to support children that my cousin there has eight. With the low birthrate we should be doing something to encourage women to stay home and have children." However, other women were strongly opposed to such a strategy.

- Income transfers from husband to wife. "Is there some way of deducting from the husband's salary and making a direct payment to his wife?"

- A Registered Maternity Savings Plan.

Although the Homemaker's Pension was a generally popular idea (several deemed it "essential"), at least one woman objected to it. "My sister-in-law has chosen to stay at home. But here I am working my butt off for my pension while she has a nice life at home. I'm going to resent her getting something that I had to work two jobs for."

Other participants urged women to highlight their homemaking skills when applying for jobs. One woman had listed her homemaking skills (budgeting, handling several jobs at once, bookkeeping, crisis management) on her resume to account for an eight-year period at home and was hired. The Alberta Government should encourage all employers to take homemaking skills and experience into account when screening applications, suggested several participants.

PAY WOMEN FAIRLY

> ***"A secretary is in effect an administrative assistant. If a man did the same job he would have that title and more money."***
> *A working woman.*

Fair pay was easily the most complicated issue tackled during the *Dialogue*. Everyone agreed fair pay principles were essential to overcoming discrimination in the workplace and to achieving greater economic security for women. However, there was no consensus on what fair pay meant or on how it should be achieved. Some participants defined it as equal pay for the same or similar work (the current law in place in Alberta under the Individual's Rights Protection Act) while many others thought of it as equal pay for work of equal value, commonly known as pay equity.

On balance, professional and other non-traditional working women felt fairly compensated for their work. Fair pay, they suggested, was more an issue for women in the pink-collar ghetto, where they said women's work was largely underpaid and undervalued, especially in small towns. "The pay women receive, ... should be enhanced and the value of skills required for these jobs recognized," said one woman.

To accomplish this, some women's advocates urged the Alberta Government to enact pay equity legislation like Ontario's, which requires all public and private sector employers of 10 or more people to adopt gender-neutral pay scales by 1993. They noted that systems (i.e. Hay Evaluation System) for evaluating jobs on the basis of skills, effort, responsibility and working conditions already exist.

But other participants were less enthusiastic about enacting pay equity laws. "Government legislation will only cause more problems," worried one woman. Pay equity may be best achieved through market forces, suggested a union representative. A feminist spokesperson said the women's movement is divided. "Some people are pushing for it (pay equity law); others are saying it doesn't address the real issues."

For their part, women in low paying jobs had mixed feelings about pay equity. Although they welcomed bigger pay cheques, they worried about losing their jobs. "Most of the jobs in small cities are low-paying clerical. If there was legislation to raise these salaries, most businessmen would have a real problem, because they are just hanging on," said one pink-collar worker. Countered a pay equity proponent in the same focus group: "Women's low wages have subsidized employers for far too long." Besides, she added, employers could gradually phase-in pay raises.

Some women offered alternate suggestions. "Every company with 25 or more employees should be required to have a job classification system. That alone would bring about pay equity," said one. Another participant advised the Alberta Government to "keep track of what is going on in other provinces and then decide what to do. There are enough experiments going on now and plenty of other things to do for women in the meantime." Others pointed to instances where women are not receiving equal pay for the same or

similar work, and suggested that activity with regard to education, monitoring and enforcement of the current laws in this area (Individual's Rights Protection Act) be significantly enhanced.

HELP WITH THE CHILDREN

> ***"I think day care should be an extension of the school system. The economy needs women and we should all be willing to pay to have them there."*** *A working mother.*
>
> ***"I don't think it is right for me to have children and then turn them over to the state to raise."*** *A homemaker.*

Although some women believed child care to be an individual, not government, responsibility, there was little outright opposition to subsidized daycare, particularly for low income families. Generally, those philosophically opposed were willing to accept it provided mothers who stayed home to raise children received equitable financial recognition (i.e. tax breaks) for their social contribution.

Some women see daycare as a key to removing major limitations to women's full participation in the workplace. They said it would assist women to have children without sacrificing careers, help women generally to balance the heavy demands of home and work, and enable single mothers on social assistance to work full-time.

Participants disagreed as to the appropriate degree of government support for daycare. Some called for universal subsidization, arguing daycare is "like schools. It should be free to everybody because it is important that kids get good quality care." Others favoured government subsidies for the needy only. "I'm tired of giving and giving to people who want to have it all but want me to pay for it," said one woman.

Some feared universal daycare would give the state too much control over children. "We try to create this wonderful world of programs, but where is our sense of responsibility? If we turn that over to the state, we lose control," argued a focus group participant. However, most participants agreed subsidies, whether universal or not, should be paid directly to parents rather than daycare operators.

The quality of daycare was a major concern. A number of women said they had encountered daycare centres which lacked safety standards, were rarely if ever inspected and in which children were "propped in front of TV" for hours or forced to nap all day. As a result of her bad experiences, one woman no longer used daycare. "I couldn't trust it anymore. That's why I quit my full-time job to work part-time."

Many participants wanted increased government regulation of daycare staff training, workers' salaries and staff-to-child ratios. Additionally, they preferred non-profit to for-profit centres, arguing private-sector care of the young (and elderly) would be compro-

mised by the profit motive. Said one woman: "There is no difference in cost to parents between profit and non-profit daycare. But in non-profit they get better quality staff and staff get higher salaries." Another women wanted the provincial government to provide parents with a checklist of points to look for in selecting daycare. "If people knew what questions to ask, it would help them avoid bad situations."

Employer-subsidized daycare at the workplace received considerable support from participants. Several women pointed to one of the Alberta Vocational Centres, which provides daycare for staff and students. "Students and employees are never late for classes or work. They're never absent. The morale is really high. It's been great, good for the employer," said a participant.

One woman, an Alberta public servant, pointed to another provincial government's provision of on-site daycare. "The employees are happier, and more secure in knowing their children are close," she reported. Fathers are able to spend more time with children, too, observed others. As for costs to the employer, one woman declared, "Employers should provide it. Benefits are the big thing now, why not daycare?"

But not everybody wanted on-site daycare. Noted one woman: "I work so my kids can have a nice, clean neighbourhood to live in. Why would I want to bring them to a dirty environment?" She and several others preferred neighbourhood daycare.

Other suggestions on the child care front included extending maternity leave to 18 months to provide working women with an alternative to placing infants in daycare. And several women proposed more after-school programs for "latch-key" children, and flexible child care arrangements for shift workers. Moreover, several farm wives stressed the need for temporary child care so that women helping with the harvests were not forced to leave children unattended. Said one farm woman: "Child care is my bugaboo. When the children were small on the farm, I wished there was some place I could put the kids because I was needed in the field."

WORKPLACE STRATEGIES

> ***"In my ideal society men would work half-time and so would women. When I told my husband about this idea, he said it was the most shocking thing I ever said."*** *Focus group participant.*

Part-time work, job sharing, contract work, flexible hours, family-related leaves of absence and self-employment were among the suggestions for rendering the workplace more accommodating to the needs of family women and men. Participants acknowledged some jobs are more rigidly demanding than others. But most agreed a little creativity and compromise on the part of employers and employees would help women balance home and work demands, enhance their ability to pursue careers and, ultimately, expand women's choices, along with Alberta's economic productivity. It was also suggested that the Government of Alberta could lead by example in many of these areas as a "model employer."

Many participants considered the growth in part-time work over the last decade to be a positive development for women. Indeed, one woman insisted the government force companies "to have permanent part-time work so more women can have children and careers."

The majority of participants urged the Alberta Government to encourage employers, either by example or legislation, to provide at least some pro-rated employee benefits to part-time workers. Pro-rated benefits would render part-time economically feasible for more women, agreed a number of focus groups.

Employers shouldn't underrate the importance of benefits to part-time workers, suggested one woman. "I joined the union because it promised to work for part-time benefits. If the employer had been more responsive, he could have kept the union out of our organization. Instead he is losing a lot of loyalty."

A form of part-time advocated by a number of participants was job sharing. "It gives you the best of both worlds," said one woman. In one focus group, two women explained how they shared the same community information officer position by each working 11 days a month, with a few days of overlap, phone calls and a journal to keep one another apprised of the other's activities.

More flexible work hours would accommodate both employer and employee needs, suggested several participants. Recalled one focus group participant: "I had a secretary when I worked for an oil company in Calgary. We gave her time off when she needed it. She would also work right through the night if we needed her. I told her to keep track of those extra hours and we'd balance them out. Flexibility works both ways."

Many participants felt that family-oriented benefits like extended maternity leave and days off for family matters (one participant suggested "trading off" sick days or dental benefits for family-related leave) would enhance worker loyalty and productivity. The idea of a menu of benefits was popular with many of the women. They liked the idea of including family sick leave as one of the benefits. One advantage they could see in flexible benefits is that they could integrate their benefit package with their husbands and come up with a better overall program.

But one focus group participant, a small employer, said that wasn't always the case. "I have a women who works for me and she always seems to want time off for weddings and other family events. It's beginning to bother me a lot because I don't think she is committed to her job."

And another focus group member, playing self-described devil's advocate, described two real-life situations in which flexibility had taken a toll. "In one case an employer gave a girl extensive training on a specialized computer. Afterwards, she took maternity leave and wasn't sure if she would come back. In another case a friend of mine was seeing a female psychiatrist. The psychiatrist took maternity leave and the woman was devastated because nobody could take over. Before we get equal pay or equal anything else, those are the things we have to address."

Self-employment was seen as an increasingly attractive option for women who are trying to combine career and family. For some women, the main benefit of self-employment is that it allows them to work at home. Suggestions to assist women in this area included improved access to credit for business start-ups, and increased availability of training courses and financial assistance for training.

For some participants, economic equity implied some kind of affirmative action program. This concept disturbed a number of women, who said they wanted to be promoted because of their ability "and not because I'm a woman." Others felt that without it, progress will not happen fast enough. As one woman said: "Otherwise it will be years before anything happens – my grandchildren might get it."

PART THREE – THE EMPLOYER INTERVIEWS

Of course, any successful effort to enhance equity for women in the workplace requires the cooperation, support and initiative of Alberta's employers. In recognition of their key role, we interviewed representatives of more than 20 employers in the province about key economic equity issues. Following is a report on those discussions.

ON PAY EQUITY

Although still a topic of considerable debate among Albertans, "equal pay for work of equal value" is quickly becoming a fact of life for federally-regulated firms and those with operations in Ontario. For example, all banks have already re-evaluated and reclassified their jobs to comply with federal pay equity legislation passed in 1978.

Similarly, a number of major oil companies are instituting nationwide pay equity systems to comply with Ontario's legislation, which takes partial effect January 1, 1990.

However, one company representative finds gathering information on hundreds of jobs to be "long, tedious work" that has already cost his company $200,000 in consulting fees. He thought this excessive in a time when oil companies are trying to improve their competitive position.

A representative from another major company implementing pay equity worried such laws have unduly raised women's expectations for bigger pay cheques. He doubted wage increases would be significant. The spokesperson for yet another major oil firm predicted pay equity legislation will reduce the wage gap (now 35 per cent in Alberta) by about five per cent.

In addition to several major private sector employers, a number of cities and academic institutions in Alberta are either reviewing or implementing pay equity policies of their own, even though they are not legally required to do so.

The president of a small Alberta oil company thought responsibility levels and the marketplace should determine pay rates. Meanwhile, the director of placement services for a major Alberta employer outside the oil patch called the equal value concept "absurd." She preferred the term "equal responsibility and accountability," and said, "We pay people to provide a service and pay according to the value of the service to the buyer. We may be equal in the eyes of God, but not in the job market."

ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS

Several major employers in Alberta are engaging in equal opportunity programs for women, visible minorities, Natives, and the disabled. For example, one major bank now hires and promotes equal numbers of men and women at the management level. This is partly in response to the federal government's 1986 Employment Equity Act requiring federally-regulated companies to report on the numbers of women and minority members on staff and to state goals and timetables for achieving equity. According to a major bank spokesperson, bankers generally are adopting an employment equity philosophy, a major switch from the "nobody can tell us how to recruit, classify, or train" approach of old.

Several employers outside federal jurisdiction have increased or are planning to increase the hiring and promotion of women, too. A spokesperson for a major oil firm reported 40 per cent of all students recruited by his company are women, up 12 percentage points in the last three years. Additionally, his company now promotes women at a faster rate than men.

Another company plans to hire more women and visible minorities to avoid future labour shortages. Company expectations are that only 25 per cent of the new Canadian workers between now and the year 2000 will be white males; the rest will be women and visible minorities. The firm also predicts that men and women will eventually participate about equally in the labour market. (In Alberta the labour force participation rate is currently 63 per cent for females, 81 per cent for males).

Some employers raised the question who should pay for the added cost of training women as to training men, given that on average, women have higher rates of job turnover than men. It was noted that large businesses are better able to absorb additional costs than are small businesses.

ON NON-TRADITIONAL JOBS

According to a number of employers, few women are applying for the many interesting, high-paying, non-traditional jobs now open to them. For example, an employer in the communications field wanted to hire women for a variety of "clean" technical jobs with beginning salaries of from $40,000 to $50,000 a year. But he could not find any female technical school graduates. Similarly, a company in the Alberta forest industry, which considers itself an equal opportunity employer, has received no applications from women for non-traditional jobs.

A representative from one company felt governments had overly high expectations of employers' abilities to attract women into non-traditional jobs. He urged schools to help by educating children about their career choices, beginning in kindergarten.

However, women are beginning to make inroads. One oil industry spokesperson reported a growing number of women in the engineering and geology fields. An assistant hospital administrator in northern Alberta has hired female electricians and ambulance drivers. And the human resource manager of a major department store was impressed by the growing numbers of women at all levels of store management.

Not everything is running smoothly. The president of a medium-sized oil company had to release a woman in his head office geology group who "didn't work out" because she "didn't seem to fit" with rockhound culture. He suspected the oil patch "macho" tradition of long days and after -hours fraternizing discouraged women from entering the industry.

As for traditional women's jobs, one oil company spokesperson foresaw the pink-collar ghetto's imminent demise as personal computers reduce the need for typists and secretaries. In her view, large companies will likely re-train ghetto workers to do higher-paying data "massaging" jobs; workers for smaller companies (the majority of workers in Alberta) will probably require government assistance in upgrading their skills. Three different employers indicated they were developing some programs to make more effective use of their female clerical employees in anticipation of labour shortages.

Two employers tried to dismantle the pink-collar ghetto by placing men in traditional women's jobs. In one case, male managers blocked the plan because they didn't want male secretaries. In another, female supervisors objected. Other employers were considering programs to upgrade the skills of pink-collar workers and promote them to higher-paying positions.

Some employers have introduced programs to encourage women to apply for work in non-traditional jobs and are also running programs for their male employees designed to break down gender stereotyping.

ON DAYCARE

Corporate support for on-site daycare was more cautious compared to its backing for other equity measures. One president of a small company demanded to know why he should be expected to cover the costs of raising other people's children. "They had the kids." Executives at another firm considered daycare a parental responsibility and the costs of establishing it on-site prohibitive. Another executive, who thought daycare subsidies should be restricted to single mothers, found his employees split over on-site daycare, with those in Toronto for it and those in Calgary against. In any event, his company had no plans to introduce it.

However, pockets of support did emerge. One major company found on-site daycare too expensive, but was considering a program to help employees find daycare and to provide emergency childcare coverage. Another firm plans to open an on-site, professionally-run daycare centre within a few months as a pilot project. The subsidized cost to employees will be up to $400 a month, a price considered too high by many staff members, who have taken to calling the project "executive daycare." A spokesperson for the banking industry predicted on-site daycare would soon be commonplace in his industry.

ON FLEXIBILITY

Daycare aside, most employers were open to making workplaces more flexible for female workers.

One company is considering introducing five-year maternity leaves for its women managers. Said a company spokesperson: "Companies need to take a long-term perspective on women, whose careers will probably last 30 years." He believed governments should lead by example.

Another company is about to implement a flextime system in which employees work the core hours of 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., making up the rest of their 37.5-hour week at their own convenience. Additionally, the company is thinking of introducing a "menu-style" benefits package enabling staff to pick and choose benefits best suiting family needs. (Several other firms are considering the same idea). It also plans to allow employees to write job sharing contracts with one another, and, at least one company official thinks workers on parental leave should be encouraged to attend school part-time.

One employer, an oil industry representative, saw part-time as the wave of the future as more employees take parental leave and early retirement. A number of employers are offering benefits to their part-time workers. One organization's part-time benefits package includes Blue Cross, a pension plan, and medical, life, and dental insurance. At least one major bank is offering its part-time employees full health, proportional pension, and share ownership benefits. Many of its part-timers have refused full-time work. Moreover, job sharing is common among clerical staff, and nine-month maternity leaves are now available to either parent.

Most of the employers interviewed saw no difficulty in generating part-time or shared jobs for traditional work done by women, including professional jobs such as nursing and teaching. However, the employers raised concerns about developing job sharing options for those in supervisory or management positions.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to the many individuals who contributed to the *Alberta Dialogue on Women's Economic Equity,* the Alberta Government now has additional information on the many economic equity issues of concern to women today. The *Dialogue* will be of significant value in the development of policies and programs that address the needs of women and their families.

Women in Alberta today have more choices and opportunities than ever before. However, with these choices and opportunities, there may be new challenges. Pay fairness, education, training and counselling, daycare, participation in the community, respect for homemakers, recognition of women's need to work, workplace flexibility – all of these were identified as issues and areas of concern.

In developing its *Plan For Action For Women* and other provincial government initiatives to enchance women's economic equity, the Alberta Government will take these concerns into account. Women, the workplace, the educational system, the family and government – all will need to work together in partnership to promote the full and equal participation of women in Alberta life.

The task is challenging and will require measures that recognize and reconcile the economic reality of the workplace with the social reality of women's lives. For a variety of reasons, most Alberta women now work outside the home. They also retain, and according to *Dialogue* participants want to retain, their role as primary caregivers in the home. New policies and programs will continue to take this dual role into account.

As stated in *Caring and Responsibility: A Statement of Social Policy for Alberta:*

> ***"the government will provide the necessary leadership and overall responsibility for provincial social policies, and will provide support and resources to create an environment in which Albertans can work together, be self-reliant, and take responsibility for their own lives, their families and their communities."***